

*The moral tendency of the genuine Christian
Doctrine.*

A

DISCOURSE,

WRITTEN WITH REFERENCE TO MR. A.
FULLER'S EXAMINATION OF THE CAL-
VINISTIC AND SOCINIAN SYSTEMS,

AND

DELIVERED AT THE BOW MEETING-HOUSE,
IN EXETER, JULY 6TH, 1796.

BEFORE THE

SOCIETY OF UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS,
ESTABLISHED IN THE WEST OF ENGLAND,

FOR

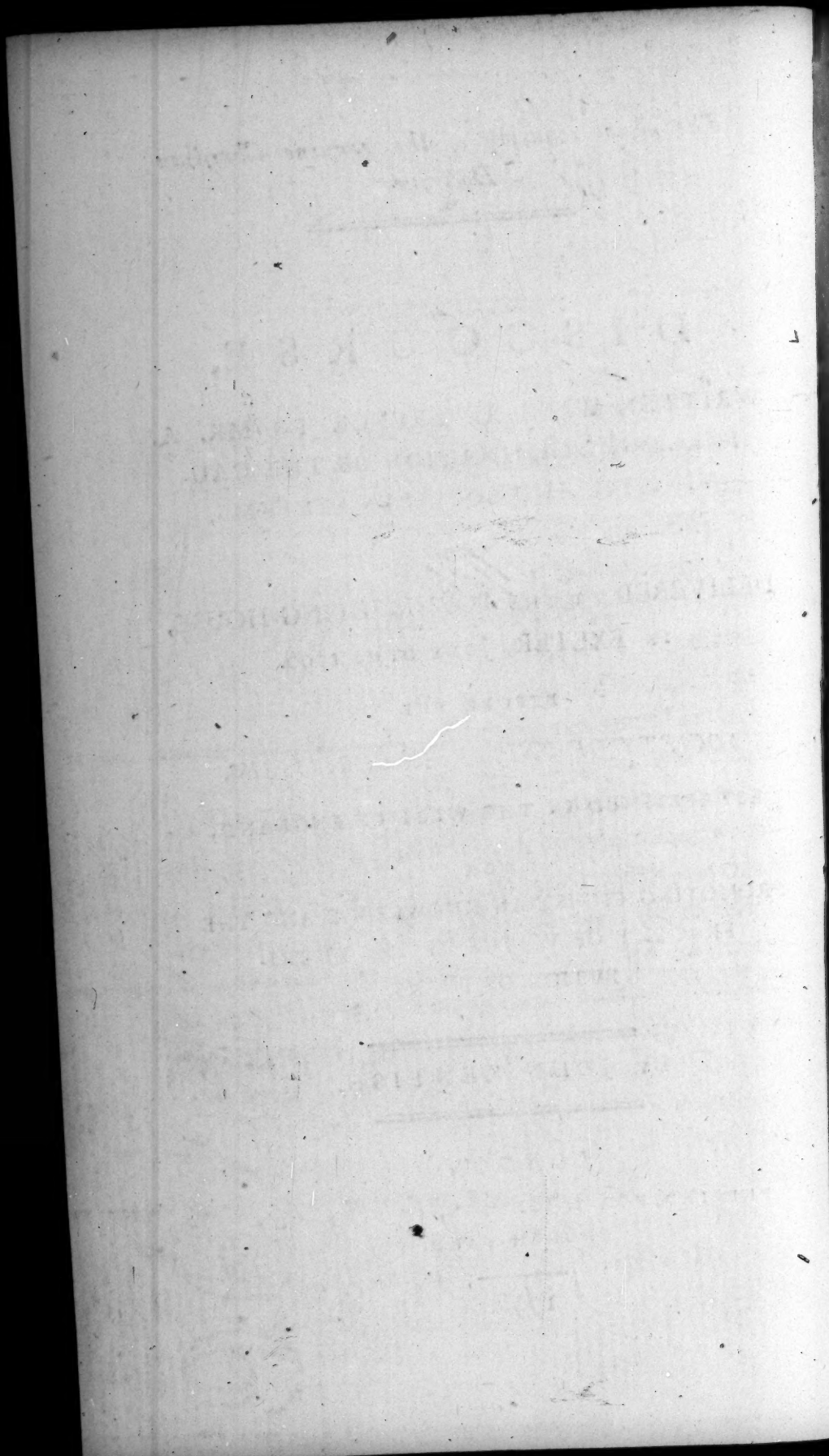
PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE AND THE
PRACTICE OF VIRTUE BY THE DISTRI-
BUTION OF BOOKS.

BY JOHN KENTISH.

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P R E F A C E.

THE subject and method of the following discourse were principally suggested by a publication of Mr. A. Fuller entitled: "The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems examined and compared as to their moral tendency;" a work which the author had not till lately an opportunity of reading. It was by no means his intention, or his wish, to canvass every observation which is there advanced. Of Mr. Fuller's remarks many are personal, and many refer solely to a vindication of the religious principles that he has seen proper to embrace. Upon nothing of either kind has it been thought fit here to animadvert. The writer was desirous only of shewing that, what he sincerely believes to be the genuine Christian doctrine has a tendency highly favourable to virtue and happiness, that, as a rule of conduct and a source of consolation it is not less valuable and efficacious than more popular representations of Christianity. It is hoped, nevertheless, that what he has remarked will serve to ascertain the validity and extent of the argument which Mr. Fuller has adduced, and to il-

illustrate the spirit in which his examination is written.

He has only to add, that of Mr. Fuller's sincerity and zeal he entertains not a doubt; but that he admits not the claim to infallibility, and to a knowledge of the motives and designs of men which many of his expressions imply, and which, from, the general tenor of his work he seems to arrogate. It was, surely in an unguarded moment that our examiner, presumed to charge Unitarian Christians with having "a heart secretly disaffected to the true character and government of God, and dissatisfied with the gospel way of salvation*." Let the reader determine whether this language be consistent with a just sense of human ignorance and weakness, with the Christian moderation which judgeth not another, or with the evangelical charity which "hopeth all things," which says, "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity"—with all who obey the precepts and imitate the example of our common master!

August, 1796.

* Page 326.

I TIM.

A
DISCOURSE, &c.

I TIM. VI. 3.

The Doctrine which is according to Godliness.

I HAVE chosen as the subject of my address to you, upon this occasion, the moral tendency of the religious opinions, by which our society is distinguished. The truth of the sentiments, for the avowal and diffusion of which we now meet, should, doubtless, be determined by the agreement of them with the scriptures. Yet it is natural, and indeed just, to estimate their value by their efficacy. In science and in common life we properly consider those principles as of chief importance, which are most subservient to the purposes of art and the regulation of the conduct: and in religion, the maxim "Ye shall know them by their fruits *," is a maxim, unquestionably, of high authority, evident reason and familiar application.

That Almighty God is strictly *one* being, *one* person, the sole creator, preserver and governor

* Matt. vii. 16.

of the universe;—that to him alone our homage is due, exclusively of all other beings and persons whatever; and—that Jesus of Nazareth, his last and most favoured messenger to mankind, was simply of the human race, though greatly exalted above every former prophet, as well by divine communications and endowments as by the superior importance of his mission, by the purity of his precepts, and by the perfection of his example;—these are the main articles in testimony to which we are at present assembled. Other, and less appropriate points of our belief, I may be led to notice in the progress of this discourse. It will be my object to prove, that the Christian Doctrine, thus viewed and thus exhibited, is “a doctrine according to *godliness*,” by which term I understand, agreeably to the usual acceptation of it in the sacred writings, not merely the duties we owe to the Deity, but general virtue.

I shall previously request your attention, however, to a few remarks upon the validity and extent of the conclusion, which it is customary to deduce from the alledged holy tendency of religious sentiments, in favour of those sentiments.

1. In the first place: an obvious effect of the impressions, to which mankind are exposed from surrounding objects, is, that no principles can so fully influence the conduct as might be expected

expected in theory. I urge not this consideration, be it observed, as a plea for languid and inferior virtue. It is plainly our duty to attempt a victory over the world. But the truth here brought forward must not be forgotten, if we desire to enter upon our subject with becoming candour.

2. While some men, again, are confessedly much better than their principles, it will not, it cannot, be disputed, that to the most valuable principles others fail of doing justice.

3. It deserves to be considered farther, whether doctrines, which have most efficacy upon the dispositions, the conduct and the feelings of Christians, be not such as they profess in common. Of the various sects, into which the followers of Jesus are divided, not one denies "that the gift of God is eternal life, and that this life is in his Son*." Respecting this important truth we may use, indeed, different expressions; and widely different may be our sentiments as to the means by which we conceive the grand end of our faith and hope will be accomplished. Still, however, that faith and hope have the same object: and what stronger motives we can require to enable us to excel "in all holy conversation and godliness," what more effectual

* 1 John v. 11.

persuatives to devout tranquillity and joy, than such as are furnished by the serious belief of a future resurrection and judgment, built upon the death and resurrection of Christ *, I am unable to imagine.

4. From a natural partiality, moreover, to opinions which themselves embrace, men will suppose those opinions to have a tendency peculiarly favourable to virtue and happiness. There is danger, therefore, *lest the conclusion to which I have adverted be drawn, rather by the feelings than by the understanding, rather by prejudice than by calm and unbiassed reason.

5. In their ideas, too, of moral excellence different sects of Christians may not exactly agree. I say not that with respect to the great outlines of virtue their sentiments will vary. It is notorious, however, that many of them severely censure certain instances of conformity to the world, which others may think not merely lawful, but deserving of praise: and the use I at present make of this remark is, to suggest a lesson of caution and moderation in the inquiry we are about to institute.

6. Lastly: The very nature of the argument proposed renders it extremely difficult to deduce from it a satisfactory inference. If to judge

* Acts xvii. 31.

respecting the conduct of men even in single cases demand much care and knowledge, far more requisite are these qualifications when sentence is to be passed upon their general character. Who, indeed, is so intimately acquainted with the various denominations of Christians, as to form a decision upon this point, that shall not be liable to the imputation of partiality or of rashness? Such a controversy can only be determined by facts; and who will undertake the arduous, the delicate task of collecting and comparing them?

In prosecution of my design, and desirous of giving due attention to these preliminary considerations, I will now inquire, I. What is the tendency of the Unitarian doctrine with respect to the cultivation and exercise of the divine, the social and the personal virtues? II. What assistance, support and consolation it affords in the season of temptation, affliction and death? III. What is its efficacy in the conversion of profligates and unbelievers? And, IV. finally, How far it is adapted to promote a veneration for the Scriptures, and to fortify our faith in Christianity?

I. The virtues, which it is our duty to cherish and express with reference to the Supreme Being, stand first in the morals of the Christian, and, indeed, in every rational system of ethics. They may be classed under love to God, and the fear
 B 5 of

of him, under pious confidence and resignation. Each of these I shall review in order.

Love to God is no enthusiastic fervour, no offspring of a licentious imagination. It consists in the highest esteem for the divine character, and in the liveliest gratitude for the divine mercies: it has its rise from meditation upon the divine goodness, and is evinced by an uniform and most chearful obedience to the divine will. In a word, it is the love of children to an earthly parent, purified only from every alloy, and directed to a superior object: and we may regard it as including all the qualities, which it becomes us to cultivate with relation to the Deity.

Why, now, it is to be asked, cannot we acquire and express this principle in a degree equal to that in which it is claimed by any of our Fellow-Christians? What should make us greater strangers to its nature? To the attainment and the exercise of it how should we have fewer and weaker motives? Our ideas of this leading feature of devotion it will hardly be attempted to controvert; nor can it be justly said, that our views of the divine attributes and government are less honourable than what others entertain, that we are less sensible to the divine benevolence, or less inclined to declare our gratitude by our obedience.

Every being is esteemed and loved by us in proportion to his goodness. To God, in whom resides the highest possible degree of goodness, we naturally render our highest esteem, our warmest love. Pure, unlimited benevolence is, in our judgment, the most glorious perfection of the divine character. We believe, according to the sublime language of the favourite Apostle *, that "God is Love;" we consider all his moral excellencies, his justice, truth and holiness, as modifications of this principle. Happiness we regard as the grand object of his works and dispensations, and conceive of his glory as resulting from the diffusion of this happiness.

These being our ideas of the Deity, love to him cannot fail to be "shed abroad" in our hearts. Did we think of him, indeed, as "one altogether like unto ourselves;" did we imagine that he is vindictive †, inexorable, arbitrary and partial; or did we suppose his glory to be something distinct from the exercise

* 1 John iv. 8.

† "That there is a mixture of the *vindictive* in the Calvinistic system is allowed; but let it be closely considered, whether this be any disparagement to it; nay rather whether it be not necessary to its perfection?" The Calvinistic and Socinian Systems compared, by A. Fuller, Edit. 2nd. p. 119.

of his goodness *; we might experience difficulty in obedience to this “first and greatest” of the commandments. But in the contemplation of infinite power employed to execute designs which proceed from infinite benevolence, and are planned by consummate wisdom, filial affection toward God is naturally enkindled and preserved alive in our breasts.

By the goodness of the Almighty exhibited in the works of nature, in the dispensations of providence, and in our temporal comfort, we are as much impressed, I presume, as any class of Christians. And if we neither think nor speak exactly like some of them, concerning the divine love manifested in the gift of Jesus Christ, it must not hence be inferred, that we are less attentive to its magnitude and extent †.

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* Fuller, p. 126—132.

† “Writers are apt to express themselves, as if the Christian revelation would be of little value, unless their particular systems are adopted: but this is a kind of language which is extremely injudicious, and which ought to be avoided and discouraged. The Apostle St. Paul, speaking of Jesus Christ, saith: ‘Who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption §.’ To this account of things every Christian, of every denomination, gives a most ready and cordial assent. But can any man be said to

§ 1 Cor. i. 30.

“think

It is our persuasion on the contrary, that, from the views we cherish of this important subject, we can say with peculiar justice " we love him " because he first loved us *." That love we feel a powerful motive to the most willing obedience : and, in point of fact, it can scarcely be proved that we are here surpassed by our Fellow Christians ; though God forbid we should rashly arrogate to ourselves superiority of virtue !

It may at least, however, be affirmed, that

" think meanly of the evangelical dispensation, or to detract from its excellence and dignity, who believes that " God is the author of it, that it was communicated by " Jesus Christ, and that he conveys to us knowledge, " pardon, holiness, and eternal life ? These are blessings " of unspeakable importance ; blessings which render the " Gospel a pearl of invaluable price : and as such it will " be esteemed by all who assent to its truth and divine " authority, whatever sentiments they may embrace concerning matters of more doubtful disputation." Kippis's Life of Lardner, p. 67, 68. I cannot transcribe this passage, and surely no person can read it, without a warm admiration of the truly liberal and Christian spirit of the excellent author. They who had the happiness of a personal acquaintance with him, will regard it as a striking picture of that accuracy of judgment, and that " meekness of wisdom," which were not less visible in his discourses, lectures, and conversation, than they are in his writings, and the recollection of which renders his death the subject of deep, general, and just regret.

* 1 John iv. 19.

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our religious principles are, in their nature, eminently favourable to the exercise of love to God.

The doctrine that, "to us there is but one God even the Father*," is not a barren and speculative truth, but one of great, practical moment. As such it was originally announced by the Jewish, as such it is repeated by the Christian lawgiver. It is remarkable, that both first declare, in terms the clearest and most emphatic: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is "one Lord," and then subjoin immediately: "and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with "all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with "all thy mind, and with all thy strength†." Who does not perceive, now, that the unity and supremacy of the Divine Being are here proposed as an argument for loving him with an entire, undivided affection? An excellent translator of the New Testament intimates that the word *and* may sometimes have the sense of *therefore*‡. Such appears to be its import in the present instance: but not to insist upon this point, why, I may ask, is an admonition to supreme love toward God thus introduced by a solemn

* 1 Cor. viii. 6.

† Deut. vi. 4, 5. Mark xii. 29, 30.

‡ Mr. Wakefield in his note on John xvii. 5.

assertion.

assertion of his unity, unless we are to consider this truth as a motive to the duty? Is it not manifest, that, if there be more than one person or being whom we are to regard distinctly as God, we cannot love each of them with *all* our hearts, *all* our souls, *all* our minds, and *all* our strength? Is it not evident, that such love can be exercised only upon a single object? If, likewise, we believe not God to be strictly one, it seems impossible, that we should indulge those just and exalted ideas of his perfections and character, which reason, sanctioned by Christianity, suggests; it seems impossible, that we should not be distracted and bewildered in the worship we address to a plurality of deities, or that we should not be exposed to the various absurdities in speculation and practice, which have ever attended a belief in polytheism. Hence it follows, that the absolute unity of the first cause is a truth of such magnitude, as to justify, nay even to require all the efforts of rational zeal for its defence, preservation and diffusion, all the painful and costly sacrifices of "godly sincerity," in its avowal. To publish and restore such a truth, it is natural to imagine, that the Deity would employ extraordinary means, could it not, in the usual course of things, be discovered and retained by his creatures.

It may not be improper to consider under this
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head the subject of love to Christ, which some of our brethren maintain is connected, almost exclusively, with their sentiments of Christianity.

Our love of an intelligent being, unallied to us by natural affinity, must have its origin either in a perception of his moral excellencies, or in a grateful sense of benefits received from him, or in both these circumstances united.

In strict propriety of language, we cannot be said to love exalted grandeur, eminent knowledge, uncommon power. These attributes may excite, indeed, our reverence; but it were incongruous to affirm, that they call forth our affection. As justly might we assert, that we love the sublimity of the cloud-topped mountain, or the dreadful majesty and the awful thunders of the destroying tempest. Thus the Almighty proposes himself to us, in the volumes of nature and revelation, as the object of love, not because he is the greatest, but, because he is the best of beings; not because he is omnipotence, because he is wisdom, but, because he is love. So farther, love to Christ has its just foundation, not in a persuasion of his superior dignity, but in a conviction that his character was distinguished by "the beauty of holiness," by the charms of virtue.

From gratitude, moreover, love frequently results.

results. We usually cherish and express it toward a benefactor, and that in proportion to the number and importance of his favours. It is upon this principle that we discern, that we feel the reasonableness of giving to God, the supreme author of our enjoyments, our highest, purest love. Hence, too, we cannot avoid indulging and shewing affection for those of our fellow-creatures, whom he disposes and enables to do us good, and who, in truth, are but the instruments of his bounty. It is upon the same principle that we perceive the justice of manifesting no common love to Christ, the author, under God, of our most valuable privileges, and our richest blessings.

Should it be urged, notwithstanding, that our love to Jesus would be greater, did we ascribe to him a divine or a super-human nature, I reply, that in the former case, our increased regard to Christ would infringe upon our pious gratitude to the adorable being, whom we are commanded to love with an entire affection.— In the second instance, I answer, that our love to a rational and moral agent depends (as has been already stated) not upon the rank he holds, but upon the virtues he possesses, and the benefits he confers. Whether Jesus be, as some think, a divine person, whether he be a spirit of superior order in the scale of intelligent existence,
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or whether, as appears to us, and in the language of Scripture, he be "in all things like unto his brethren *," he is equally the minister of God to mankind for the highest good, equally the herald of glad tidings of the greatest joy, equally the instrument of conveying to us the most inestimable blessings. His love to the human race, a love which even death could not destroy, calls for every tribute of affection, which is consistent with the supreme thankfulness and love we owe to "his Father, and our Father, to his God, and our God †."

From the lips of our divine instructor himself let us learn, however, the lesson of love to him; let us hence be informed in what this principle consists. "If a man love me," says Jesus, "he will keep my words—he that loveth me not, keepeth not my sayings—ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you —these things I command you, that ye love one another ‡." Who can here refrain from observing how truly rational is this language, how remote from mystery and enthusiasm? But while Christ declares, that such as obey his laws, as imbibe his spirit, manifest love to him, let none of his followers be so ignorant and pre-

* Heb. ii. 17.

† John xx. 17.

‡ John xiv. xv.

sumptuous as to insist upon other testimonies of affection to their master. Of better they cannot possibly conceive, upon stronger they cannot possibly rely.

Let the influence of our characteristic principles upon our fear of God be next examined.

That "perfect love casteth out fear*" is a remark strictly agreeable to the constitution of the human mind. Such, however, is the state of man, that it seems impossible for him to indulge the contemplation of Deity, without feeling, in a certain degree, the latter emotion. The fear of God, nevertheless, is not slavish dread, but filial reverence. It is the veneration of infinite grandeur, and is expressed by a pious concern never to offend: it is, in the language of a sacred writer, to "fear the Lord and his godness†;" it shrinks, and is appalled at the very thought of abusing the love, of which it has experienced such illustrious manifestations.

But to prove, that our religious sentiments must, of necessity, be unfavourable to the exercise of this devout reverence, were equally difficult, as to shew, that such is actually their effect. It may be asserted, indeed, that we have as real and profound a veneration for the divine

* 1 John iv. 18.

† Hof. iii. 5.

character as any of our brethren; although we may not, like them, conceive of the justice of the Deity as distinct from his benevolence; or of his glory as separate from the happiness of the creation, or suppose, that his punishments are properly vindictive.

There are those of our Fellow Christians, who seem to delight in considering, and in representing, the Supreme Being merely as the sovereign of mankind, and who think and speak, respecting the measures of his administration, as though they were precisely similar to the measures which are pursued by earthly rulers. That God is the moral governor of his intelligent creation is the doctrine, undoubtedly, of reason and of Scripture. His government, however, is to be regarded as parental: and I appeal to every serious and candid man, whether this be not the light in which the Christian Scriptures chiefly place it: whether he be not there uniformly described as the gracious Father of all men, proclaiming by his most beloved son his readiness to forgive, receive and bless his returning children. Do they mention our mercies? They are the gifts of a Father:—our afflictions? They are the corrections of a Father, and this is the tender and engaging name under which you are encouraged to address to him your prayers, and to repose in him your confidence. Such being
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the fact, "the idea, on which we love principally to dwell" in relation to the Deity, "is that of a Father*." In fearing God we venerate a parent, looking up to him neither with superstitious horror, nor with enthusiastic familiarity.

Every man, indeed, who contrasts human unworthiness with divine purity, every man who is actuated by a just regard to the divine presence and authority, will be solicitous to "stand in awe and" to "sin not." A deep-felt reverence of God, instead of being inconsistent with the most scriptural and animating views of his moral character, is their proper, natural effect. There is a seriousness of temper, which is by no means hostile to holy cheerfulness and joy, which is as distant from levity as it is from rigour of manners, and to which, I flatter myself, my brethren, that we are not altogether strangers.

I proceed to the duties of devout trust and resignation, as far as they are related to the present subject.

Confidence in the Divine Being results from a persuasion, that he is almighty to defend, supremely wise to direct, and infinitely good to bless his creatures; and, strengthened by virtu-

* Fuller, p. 122.

ous habits, it will naturally produce acquiescence in all the measures of his government. Such trust we repose in *one* being, such acquiescence we exercise in his dispensations; and does the consideration that he is *one* weaken either? "He who spared not his own son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things*?" is a question, moreover, from which, I apprehend, the Unitarian Christian derives equal comfort with any who rank under other denominations: I believe, too, that it equally qualifies him for saying, in the hour of trial: "Father, glorify thy name!"

Our doctrine, then, my brethren, is "a doctrine according to godliness," even if we receive that phrase in its most limited and its rarest significations. Various, it is true, are the opinions and the standards of piety that prevail among the professors of our common faith. But taking for our authority the language of the Scriptures, which is surely the language also of the soundest reason, we call upon our Fellow Christians to shew, that, as a body, we are less actuated than others by the spirit of genuine devotion. Among every denomination there are doubtless those who adorn not their doctrine.

* Rom. viii. 32.

Yet if we search the records of history, if we look impartially around us, what must be the decision? The illustrious piety of the primitive believers none can question; but the piety of the primitive believers, there appears to be just cause for asserting *, was established upon those views of God and Christ that we embrace. Waving, however, the discussion of this point, as foreign to my immediate design, the Polish Socinians, it may be remarked, were men that "walked humbly" and constantly "with God †." Our religious sentiments, it is granted, differ in some respects from theirs: but there is sufficient correspondence between them to render their examples, in this instance, a pertinent illustration and an indisputable testimony. What, again, shall we say of Biddle ‡, and of Firmin §; and, may I not add, of Newton and of Locke ||? Why,

* See Dr. Priestley's History of the Corruptions of Christianity, and of Early Opinions.

† See Lindsey's Historical View: and Toulmin's Life of Socinus.

‡ See his Life by Dr. Toulmin.

§ His Life by Mr. Cornish.

|| "Newton and Locke," says the Bishop of Landaff, (See Catalogue of Books in Divinity, p. 39, at the end of Collection of Theological Tracts) "were esteemed Socinians." See also Disney's Memoirs of Sykes, p. 311, and the Testimony of H. Haynes, Esq. as recorded

Why, too, should I not mention the venerable name of Lardner, through whose invaluable writings a rich vein of piety is to be traced, and concerning whom it is said by his biographer, "a regard to God appears to have been ever the governing principle of his actions *?" More recent, are the characters of Jebb † and Price ‡. Nor can I here forbear to think upon not a few among the living, who, by their sacrifices, their writings, and their "conversation in the world," have, "witnessed a good confession" in favour of primitive Christianity, and who exemplify that *habitual devotion*, and that *duty of not living to ourselves*, which one of them, with clearness

ed by Baron in his preface to the Cordial for Low Spirits. Consult likewise Maclaurin's account of Sir I. Newton's Philosophical Discoveries; b. iv. c. 9. Ed. 4to. London.

* Kippis' Life of Lardner, p. 87.

† Disney's life of Dr. John Jebb.

‡ The unaffected piety of this celebrated man will be long remembered. Although no believer in the simple humanity of Christ, he declared, nevertheless, that "with him it was an essential point to worship one God alone." Price's Sermons on the Christian Doctrine, p. 143, note.

It is a tribute due to the memory of departed excellence to subjoin here the names of William Tayleur, Esq. of Belmont; (see Monthly Mag. May 1796, p. 351) and of Mr. John Mort, (see A Short View of his Life, Sentiments and Character, by H. Toulmin. 1789.)

and

and simplicity that are peculiarly his own, has unfolded and enforced *.

I have thus enlarged upon the tendency of the Unitarian doctrine, with regard to the cultivation and exercise of piety, because we have been charged with "greatly overlooking this branch of virtue." The influence of our religious sentiments upon our obedience to the commandments of the second table is now to be examined. Fewer observations will here be requisite; since to these duties, it is stated, "we almost confine ourselves." It is alledged, that we exalt "the social virtues, or those virtues which respect society, to the neglect," as it is added, "and often at the expence of others, which more immediately respect the

* See two discourses upon these subjects by Dr. Priestley, a man whom calumny and persecution have laid under sufficiently large contributions to them, as a tax for being eminent. In conjunction with these inimitable sermons should be read *an address to the Deity* that, immediately after the delivery of the former, was written by Mrs. Barbauld, concerning whom the friends of literature, of freedom, of religion, and of the rising generation, only complain, that she writes so little. These compositions, together with Dr. Priestley's dedication to Dr. John Jebb of his *Illustrations of Philosophical Necessity*, prove that devotion, and indeed religious poetry, is not exclusively dependent upon what it is customary to stile orthodox views of Christianity.

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“ God that made us*.” The justice of the representation, to say the least, seems equal to its decency. But it is happy that the fallible judgment of human beings will not finally decide upon our characters.

Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself † : Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them ‡ : these are the grand and comprehensive precepts of Christian morality, with reference to the social virtues. True benevolence, in short, is the spring of all the duties we owe to our fellow-creatures, as is love to God of every quality that is properly devotional. A pure and evangelic love to man embraces, farther, even the personal virtues, which may be comprehended under those of temperance, fortitude and patience. If we take our views of it from the correct, expressive and finished picture drawn by an Apostle § we shall be satisfied, that it supposes well-disciplined affections, and is accompanied by freedom from the selfish and malignant passions. Of the virtues which regard our fellow-men, and of those which are commonly, though erroneously, understood to have ourselves alone for their object, it will be most expedient, then, to speak conjointly. They

* Fuller, 70, 71.

† Matt. vii. 12.

‡ Mark xii. 31.

§ 1 Cor. xiii

are not either here, or in real life, to be "put afunder."

Now it is to be remarked, in general, that a belief in the simple humanity of Jesus detracts, by no means, from the respect and obedience we render to him as a moral instructor. These have their origin in a firm conviction, that "he whom God sent spake the word of God *," the word of the great and only adorable Being, by whose authority he acted, and by whose wisdom he taught. Nor is our sense of the beauty, our persuasion of the reasonableness and utility of his precepts hence diminished. These, again, result solely from attention to the precepts themselves; and his example we feel to be more attractive, encouraging and influential, because it is the example of "the *man* Christ Jesus †."

To the exercise of that benevolence, in particular, which is the badge of our religion, nothing more is necessary than a due regard to the authority by which it is enjoined, a deep sense of the claims which men have upon our brotherly affection, and the absence of every malevolent and opposing passion. What reason, now, can be assigned why the Unitarian Christian may not be as exemplary for this virtue as a Christian under any other appellation? Since he conceives,

* John iii. 34.

† 1 Tim. ii. 5.

indeed, of his Maker's goodness, manifested in revelation, as being more free, impartial and diffusive than it is esteemed and represented by others, the presumption is, that his characteristic views of the love of God will furnish him with no inconsiderable assistance, will suggest to him no inefficacious motives for the love of his neighbour.

Let it be farther observed, that the man, who has a strong and habitual conviction of the absolute necessity of a holy life to his present and future happiness, can never, either in theory or in practice, relax the obligations of morality. Now the Unitarian Christian, (I speak of him who is more than nominally so) while he relies upon the divine mercy alone for the forgiveness of his sins, and the acceptance of his imperfect virtue, knows, nevertheless, that repentance and amendment are essential to a participation in the divine favour. He is, hence, neither discouraged by despair, nor seduced by presumptuous confidence from being "diligent, unmoveable, always "abounding in the work of the Lord;" and should he finally be found inferior to others in general virtue, still, it is not easy to see how this effect is imputable to his principles.

In a state where difference of opinion, upon subjects apparently the clearest, and certainly the most important, will unavoidably exist, the
happiness

happiness of society much depends upon the due exercise of the qualities denominated candour and liberality of sentiment. Candour is the temper which leads us to ascribe to others, to those especially from whom we differ, the purest motives that circumstances allow. Liberality inclines us to believe, that, involuntary religious error exposes not men to the displeasure of their Maker ; its language is : “ In every nation “ he that feareth God, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him.” Bigotry, on the other hand, is such an inordinate attachment to our own modes of faith and worship as prompts us to “ have no dealings” with those who prefer others, to think of them with unkindness, and to act toward them with violence. It is hence evident, that a man may be perfectly candid and liberal, while yet he is by no means indifferent to religious principle ; and such, I would hope, whatever has been peremptorily advanced to the contrary *, is the character, for the most part, of Unitarian Christians.

Here, at least, my brethren, our views of Christianity give us a decided advantage over some opposers of our principles. Cordially as we are attached to divine truth, sensible as we

* “ A great deal of what is called candour and benevolence among Socinians is nothing else but indifference to all religious principle.” Fuller, p. 138.

feel of its unspeakable value, and ready, as I trust we are, at every hazard, to avow and defend it, we assert, notwithstanding, the innocence of involuntary error. It is the unhappiness of many professors of our religion to consider it as partaking of the nature of sin. Such is the language they use in their writings*, their conversation, their discourses; and, maintaining this opinion, it is impossible, surely, that they should regard the man, whose religious sentiments differ from theirs, with perfect complacency, satisfaction and benevolence. This doctrine, indeed, has proved the parent of intolerance and persecution: and so unequivocally is it condemned by reason and by scripture, by the moral attributes of the Deity, and by the frame and circumstances of man, that it is wonderful how, among persons of sense and worth, it should ever have existed. For who is ignorant, that we are, in a considerable measure, the creatures of early discipline, instruction and situation? Who is able to calculate the extensive, and, frequently, the unperceived, influence of authority and custom? Who requires to be informed, that men of acknowledged and, it should seem, of equal virtue have yet professed the most contradictory notions upon subjects of religion? The mere conclusions,

* Fuller, p. 71.

therefore,

therefore, of the understanding, where the will is unconcerned, cannot surely participate of guilt. Guilt, then only attaches itself to error, when men wilfully and indolently refuse to employ the means of better information which are put into their hands; since "according to what a man hath, and not according to what he hath not," will faith, like virtue, be accepted. By these considerations, my Fellow Christians, we are restrained from placing ourselves in the chair of infallibility, from rashly judging upon the present state and the future doom of our virtuous, though it may be, mistaken brethren: we are assisted in uniting, with a rational zeal for truth, the spirit of meekness toward "those who oppose themselves:" we have wider scope for the exercise of genuine candour and liberality of mind; nor, let me hope, are we in these virtues materially defective, though it must be acknowledged, that every sect of Christians has, in this instance, something to lament and rectify.

Omitting to specify other social and personal virtues, let me call upon fair and unbiassed observation to determine, what is the character we bear in our commerce with mankind. If it be not more exemplary than that of other Christians, it is not, perhaps, in any degree inferior. There are many of us, doubtless, who live with sobriety and righteousness, as well as with godli-
C 4
ness,

ness, in the world; and if this be the fact, no presumption arises hence, that is unfavourable to our principles. A superiority to present objects, and a spirit of evangelic benevolence, are not confined to any religious denomination. I see them, let me own with pleasure, among those who differ from us; they may be found, too, I am persuaded, among the body of Christians with whom in general sentiment we are united. That with less restraint, than is exercised by some of our brethren, we enter into the world, and indulge in its amusements, shall readily be granted; but unless it can be shewn, that we so use it as to use it to excess*, we shall take no shame to ourselves on this account. The truth is, that it is a matter of peculiar difficulty to steer the just course between seclusion from public and busy life, and due participation in its occurrences and enjoyments. Influenced by self-partiality, and by acquired habits of thinking and of acting, each sect of Christians supposes, that it has attained, in this respect, to an exact propriety of manners. What one styles rigour the other terms seriousness, what this calls levity that pronounces to be virtuous cheerfulness. The question, then, cannot by the contending parties be easily decided; but we leave

* 1 Cor. vii. 31.

it to every reflecting man to determine whether, collectively, we are distinguished by that friendship with the world, which is confessed by us to be enmity with God *.

II. It is now time that we inquire what assistance, support and consolation are furnished, in the season of temptation, affliction and death, by the doctrine we profess? And this, I am sensible, is likewise a question to which Christians will give different answers, according to the difference of their religious views. Opinions that have been long and fondly cherished interest all our feelings in their behalf; and, in advanced life, when the moral habits are confirmed, other and even correcter sentiments would, probably, be less efficacious to our virtue and our happiness. But prejudice and feeling apart, and guarding against the influence which particular names and phrases exercise, we have only to open the Christian Scriptures, and attentively to meditate upon the following passages: *Lead us not into temptation* †: *Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation* ‡: *We have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin* §: *Our light affliction, which is*

* James iv. 4.

† Matt. vi. 13.

‡ Matt. xxvi. 41.

§ Heb. iv. 15.

but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*: We know that all things work together for good to them that love God†: Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept, for since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead:—O death! where is thy sting? O grave! where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law; but thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ‡.

From the full benefit of these truths, my Fellow-Christians, are we excluded by our sentiments? From these truths can we derive no assistance, support and consolation? When, in the hour of devout retirement, you seriously reflect upon them, are they not productive of something more than mere calmness and composure §? Do they not inspire you with sacred hope and with “joy unspeakable?” But you will observe, that one motive, proposed to us as a security against temptation, is taken from the victory gained over trial by him who, “in all things like unto his

* 11 Cor. iv. 17.

† Rom. viii. 28.

‡ 1 Cor. xv. 20, 21. 55, 56, 57.

§ “The utmost happiness to which the Socinian scheme pretends consists in calmness of mind.” Fuller, p. 261.

“brethren,

“brethren,” was “in all points tempted as we are:” you will observe, too, that his resurrection from the dead is stated to be the assurance and example of ours, because it was the resurrection of a *man*. It remains, then, that, whatever advantage be claimed over us, in this instance, by persons who draw very opposite and, as we esteem them, very erroneous conclusions, from a perusal of the scriptures, yet our doctrine is here also “a doctrine according to godliness,” being adequate to supply all the aid and comfort, to the rational and virtuous mind, which frail humanity requires.

III. We are farther to examine, what is the degree of efficacy, which the Unitarian doctrine possesses, in respect to the conversion of profligates and unbelievers? The assertion has been confidently made, that to the accomplishment of this object it is totally unequal, and must so far yield the superiority to more popular representations of Christianity *. Before, however,

* “Judge for yourselves whether you may not as well “expect grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles, as to see repentance towards God, or faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ, proceeding from Socinian principles.” Fuller, Let. ii. p. 20.

“Socinianism so far from being friendly to the conversion of unbelievers, is neither adapted to the end, nor “favourable to the means.” Do. Let. iii. p. 51.

we acquiesce in the conclusion, let it be remembered, that we claim to embrace and avow no other doctrine than what Jesus and his Apostles taught, and that, if it be less successful now than when it was originally delivered, the fact is to be explained by the prevalence of human corruptions, and reflects not the slightest dishonour upon the genuine truths of our religion. We reject, it is admitted, and reason and the Scriptures we think, authorize us to reject, every pretence to sudden conversion. True conversion from sin to holiness we regard as the work of time and labour; and disposed as we are to ascribe it ultimately to the good pleasure of him who gives us the power of willing and of acting, we are of opinion, nevertheless, that it is to be sought for and completed in the use of means. "Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ," justly understood, have as intimate a connection with our views of the Christian dispensation as with those of our brethren. If our ideas of these principles vary from theirs, it follows not thence, that in themselves they are less scriptural, or in their tendency less efficacious. We hope, on the contrary, there are those in our number, who have found the plain, the simple yet the despised gospel of Christ "the power of God unto salvation."

As to the conversion of Jews and heathens,
little

little can be said on either side, inasmuch as the experiment has never, perhaps, been fairly and entirely made by both the parties. Eventually, we doubt not, that representation of Christianity which has Scripture and antiquity for its basis, which is simple in its nature, and conformable with our best ideas of the divine character and government, will every where prevail; and this remark may be extended to the case of unbelievers living in countries where Christianity is professed.

But we are supposed to manifest indifference—a deficiency in virtue and benevolence—because we have never embarked in missions for converting heathens to the faith of Christ*. I take this occasion of replying, that we admit in a considerable degree the fact, but deny expressly the justice of the conclusion. The purity of motive, which has prompted many worthy persons to engage in such designs, we admire and respect. Yet, ardently as we wish for the arrival of the day, when all nations shall form “one fold under one shepherd,” the scene, nevertheless, where our labours at least for this purpose are most requisite, seems to be the region

* “Let a single instance be produced of a Socinian teacher having so much virtue or benevolence in him as to venture among a race of barbarians merely with a view to their conversion.” Fuller, p. 46.

in which providence has cast our lot. In this country, and on every side, we behold Christianity almost buried under the corruptions of men, its truths obscured, its progress hindered, its spirit and energy counteracted. For this reason, therefore, and because we know that our exertions are most likely to be useful when they are directed to a single object, it is *here* that we chuse to remain, it is *here* that we are desirous of putting forth all our efforts for the revival of the pure faith and worship of the gospel. Our zeal in the cause of Christianity, then, may not be inferior to that of our brethren, although it have a secondary reference to another end, and be exercised in another manner.

IV. It remains that we consider, finally, how far the admission of the Unitarian doctrine is adapted to promote a veneration for the Scriptures, and to fortify our faith in Christianity? To venerate the Scriptures is to receive and value them as containing a revelation of the will of God to man; it is to investigate them with diligence and impartiality, to interpret them fairly and consistently, to be guided by the natural, plain and uniform sense of them in articles of faith, and on points of conduct. The highest reverence for the Christian Scriptures, in particular, is expressed by us, and then, it should seem, do we entertain a just and correct view of their inspiration,

piration, when we regard them as the writings of men who derived from the very best sources of information their acquaintance with the history and doctrine of Christ, of men whose integrity is beyond all question, of men who credibly relate facts and discourses which either themselves witnessed, or which they deliver on the authority of the spectators and the hearers, and who faithfully teach that word of God with a knowledge of which they were furnished by their master and by miraculous communications subsequent to his ascension*. And if this be to reverence the Scriptures, our principles, I must be allowed to think, are far indeed from being unfriendly to such veneration. But, on the other hand, if reverence for these records of our faith, these words of heavenly truth and wisdom, is to be manifested by a dread of examining them, lest their doctrines be found in contradiction to our present opinions, or by a blind acquiescence in

* Such is our belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures. It is sanctioned, we conceive, as well by the general tenor, as by many express passages of the sacred writings. We regard it, moreover, as being perfectly consistent with the strongest faith in Christianity, as enabling us to defend our religion with the greatest effect against the attacks of unbelievers, and as being most favourable to fair and rational criticism on the language of the Old and of the New Testament.

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the unavoidable inaccuracies of transcribers, and in the no less unavoidable, but more injurious, errors of translators, or by a bigotted opposition to every attempt toward an improved knowledge and version of them, or by judging of the truths which they teach rather from the sound of detached passages, than from the signification and tenor of the context, such reverence we disclaim. Sincerely and cordially attached to the sacred volume, against such reverence, nevertheless, we stedfastly protest.

Of those Christians who, after enquiry and on conviction, depart from an established or popular creed, it is the natural fate to be charged with being deists and infidels in disguise*. It is equally natural to those, who are destitute of fair and serious argument, to come forward with this unjust and illiberal accusation. Too long has such language been used to make a deep and lasting impression upon us; and in the cause of truth we may expect to receive, but must learn to disregard, calumny. For he is, in profession at least, a Christian who believes that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, commissioned by Almighty God, to instruct mankind in

* "The near affinity of Socinianism to Deism is so manifest, that it is in vain to disown it." Fuller, p. 303.
 "The infidelity of Socinians is frequently covered with a very thin disguise." Ibid 307.

the doctrine of a future life, and by his death and resurrection to place this doctrine upon the firmest basis. I appeal to the memoirs of Christ, and to the history of the Acts of the Apostles, whether the first publishers of the Gospel insisted upon a belief in other articles as essential to Christianity*. Judge then, my brethren, if our characteristic sentiments, as Unitarian Christians, be in any way hostile to these simple, yet most interesting facts. Our faith, indeed, "is built upon the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone:" and what, let it again be considered, was the belief of the earliest Christians, but a belief in "one God even the Father," and in "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus?" Their faith, nevertheless, in the divine mission of their master was of the very strongest kind.

The question, whether Jesus were the messenger of Heaven, is totally distinct from the opinions we may have formed concerning the dignity of his person, excepting inasmuch as Christianity will by some be pronounced antecedently incredible, should you maintain that it teaches the doctrine of Almighty God, the Creator of the world, having suffered upon a

* See Dr. Toulmin's Letters to Mr. Fuller, p. 8—29.

cross. Numerous, however, are the learned, able and pious men of different churches and sentiments who have stood forth as the advocates of our common faith; and it is remarkable that some, to whom we owe, in this respect, peculiar obligations, have been Unitarian Christians, and firm believers in the proper humanity of Christ*.

In the civil, the religious, and the moral state of the countries where Christianity is received, the serious observer beholds many circumstances which lead, too naturally, to its rejection.—Considered with respect to the individual himself, a disbelief of the Christian doctrine may, perhaps, for the most part be ascribed to deficiency in knowledge and attention, to certain habits of life, or to fallacious reasoning. You, my friends, will determine from your own experience, whether your ideas of the Deity and of Christ, detract “one jot or tittle,” from the strength of your faith in the truth of Christianity, or whether that faith, on the contrary, be not hence invigorated. In all our religious

* Among these the names of a Newton and a Locke, of a Lardner and a Priestley, appear highly distinguished. Let me here refer the reader to an eloquent, yet just eulogium upon Dr. Lardner by Ebenezer Radcliffe, Esq. annexed to Dr. Kippis's life of that most learned defender, and bright ornament of Christianity.

inquiries there is danger, undoubtedly, lest we hastily believe that of which evidence is wanting, or as hastily reject what evidence supports. It often happens, that a man, who was once in the former extreme, shall quickly afterward fall into the latter; and this fact is deserving of our recollection in reference to many cases of infidelity. Effects which proceed from temporary and local causes authorize no general conclusion. But it seems impossible, that the man who knows his religious faith to be in its evidence rational and scriptural, in its nature simple, and in its tendency favourable to the highest interests of human beings, should be otherwise than steadfast in the profession of it, and zealous to diffuse it by all honourable means.

To avow, in the most public manner, our sentiments of "the only true God, and of Jesus "the Christ whom he has sent;" and, by the distribution of proper books, to promote the knowledge and efficacy of these sentiments, are the grand objects that our society has in view. Even should our ideas and our representations of Christianity prove, finally, erroneous, we shall be found, I trust, to have acted from sincere conviction, and with becoming zeal. Let persons, who seek for all their portion in this life, consider it as a matter of trifling moment to what articles of faith they subscribe, in what forms

forms of worship they unite. But let no man, who aspires to the character of a consistent believer in Jesus, be indifferent to these questions. A decided and undisguised conduct in the profession of important truth is, at once, subservient, in a high degree, to the cause of human virtue and happiness, and greatly honourable to those by whom it is exhibited. Christianity, you will grant, is divine, you will allow that it is supremely valuable; and, this being your opinion, you must feel it your duty "not to be ashamed of it before men." But to each and to all of us, my brethren, those Christian principles, which after deliberate examination we have embraced, constitute an evangelic faith*; and this faith we are under a solemn obligation,

* A late writer has pleaded, with much zeal, for the union of all *Christians* in public worship, however opposite be their religious sentiments. To many of his observations I readily subscribe; and most cheerfully will I give to every man that owns Jesus to be the Christ, the right hand of Christian fellowship. But can a serious believer in the Trinity, and a consistent Unitarian Christian, be rationally expected to join in the same prayers? The former addresses his devotions to three (perhaps, I might say, four*) distinct beings, the latter to "one God even the Father." See *The Catholic Church*, by A. Robinson, printed for Johnson.

* Vid. *The Litany*.

with

with the weapons of reason and scripture, and in the spirit of meekness, to spread and to defend. The obligation, I will add, is yet more binding, should we be persuaded, that the doctrine we receive has direct relation to the right object of worship, and is a doctrine, moreover, "according to godliness."

Let all Christians, whatever be their belief, pursue similar measures for avowing and diffusing their respective sentiments; let truth be spoken with firmness, yet in love, and the interests of our common religion will hence derive no inconsiderable advantage. But let us not be viewed with the eye of jealousy and suspicion, let us meet with no opposition which is otherwise than generous; and if we must, indeed, encounter hostility, let us be attacked at least in the clear light of day.

Such associations as ours, my brethren, whatever some may suppose, have no tendency to disunite and weaken that religious body, to which it is our pride and happiness to belong. Among Protestant Dissenters, as among other classes of men that are in any degree numerous, diversity of sentiment upon very important subjects of religion has long subsisted. Yet upon common principles, and for the vindication of our common rights, we have often united with perfect cordiality. Be it at the same time remembered, nevertheless,

nevertheless, that valuable and momentous as is the cause of Protestant Dissent, the cause and the interests of Christian truth are still more valuable.

With calm perseverance, therefore, let us pursue our course. Independently of the general advantages we may hope to promote, as a society of Unitarian Christians, there are others, in particular, that we may promise ourselves from our exertions as a provincial association. Not being dispersed throughout the kingdom, our interviews are in consequence more frequent, our mutual assistance is more effectually imparted, and by these annual meetings we can the better "consider each other to provoke unto love and unto good works." And greatly should I rejoice did our example lead to the establishment of similar institutions in other districts, an object easy of accomplishment, and most desirable in its tendency.

But however this be, let us, my Fellow Christians, let all who are like-minded with ourselves, be anxious to evince that our doctrine is, indeed, a doctrine "according to godliness." Concerning the natural influence of religious opinions the world will judge, not from abstract reasoning, not from fancied tendencies, but from our dispositions and our lives. Go on then to add to your pure and scriptural faith
 "fortitude,

“ fortitude, temperance, patience, devotion, brotherly kindness and charity.” Raise your affections above present objects, and cultivate that seriousness of mind which becomes a frail and sinful being, a sojourner upon earth, a candidate for immortality.

Allow me, with peculiar earnestness, to recommend, that you regularly and fervently worship your Creator in your families, and with the congregations to which you respectively belong, that you decline not to join in the commemorative ordinance of the Lord’s Supper, that you carefully attend to the religious instruction of your children and servants, that you be meek, candid, and actively benevolent, that you honour and love virtuous men of every denomination, and that you be blameless and exemplary in the whole intercourse of life.

It has with justice been said, that the eminent Unitarian Christians of past times were men distinguished by their piety*. Be it ours, my brethren, to “ give all diligence” for the attainment of this quality. It is the best foundation, the surest pledge of general virtue, the anchor of the soul amidst the storms of public and private life, and the most effectual preservative against the false views, and the-delusive reason-

* Lindsey’s Hist. View, &c. p. 303. And Toulmin’s Life of Biddle, p. 132, 133. Ed. 1791.

ing, by which the young mind, especially, is with too much ease hurried on to infidelity.

The present state of opinions and morals may be esteemed by some unfavourable to our exertions. But it furnishes, in truth, no reason for despondence, and should animate rather to greater stedfastness, and increasing zeal. What, though we be unable to foresee the immediate consequence of our labours? They are not, however, less a duty: never were they more necessary; and of their ultimate success we have the most satisfactory persuasion. Repressed be the feelings of impatience, the language of despair. Slow is the process of enlightening and improving the general mind: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation *:" "One day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day †:" "But the counsel of Jehovah that shall stand, and the thoughts of his heart unto all generations ‡."

It may be, that scenes are opening upon our eyes more surprising and important than have long been witnessed. The season may not be far distant, when systems, which assume the name of Christian, shall, like fabrics erected upon the sand, be overthrown with a mighty fall, by the tempest and the waves. If divine wisdom and

* Luke xvii. 20. † 1 Pet. iii. 8. ‡ Ps. xxxiii. 11.
benevolence,

Benevolence, however, govern the universe, if "the word of prophecy" be "sure," the reign of pure Christianity shall have no period and no bounds. A short time before the founder of our religion ascended to Heaven, he declared to his disciples, "if ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for *my Father is greater than I**:" And why, it has been asked, did he make this latter declaration if he was only man? But let the scope of the passage be considered, and we shall find, that it was not the mere abstract doctrine of his Father's superiority which he designed to assert. It was evidently his purpose to console his disciples, now about to lose him, and to be overwhelmed with grief, by the assurance, that the adorable being, from whom his powers were derived, was able and disposed to protect, to advance the cause for which he had laboured, and for which he was to die. All opposition to its progress and triumph; the providence of God, he informs them, would effectually subdue. Never, my brethren, let this sublime truth be absent from our minds: nor let us refuse the exertions, nor shrink from the sufferings, that may be requisite to the attainment of so glorious an object.

* John xiv. 28.

